

Acts 15:1-21 ~ Teacher's Lesson The Jerusalem Council: Law? No!

Introduction: What does the Hebrew word *torah* mean? Torah is the Hebrew word for “law”. Have you ever heard of a Torah-compliant church? These are believers (hopefully!) who are under the delusion that God wants His New Testament church to submit to the Old Covenant Law of Moses. They pride themselves for their “Hebrew thinking” and eschew what they call “Greek thinking”.

The things that happened on Paul's first missionary (Acts 13-14) journey confirmed that God was calling Gentiles to respond to the gospel. The success of the mission to the Gentiles set the stage for Acts 15—the Jerusalem Council. The Jerusalem Council dealt the question of a Gentile believers' relationship to the Law of Moses (whether or not Gentiles have to pass through the gates of Judaism to come to Jesus).

******What controversial teaching caused the Antioch church to consult the apostles (15:1-5)?** Men from Judea traveled to Antioch teaching that it was necessary to be circumcised in order to be saved. The apostles were the norm for doctrine and practice in the early church. The Antioch church decided to appoint Paul, Barnabas, and others to question the apostles about it.¹ This is a very serious error; that the church successfully dealt with the error is evidenced in the fact that you will not meet anyone today who teaches that being circumcised is necessary for salvation.

- 1. What had just happened that motivated these men to travel from Judea to Antioch to teach circumcision (14:1)?** See Acts 13-14. Many Gentiles came to Christ throughout Galatia during Paul's first missionary journey. The entrance of so many Gentiles into the church was, of course, the catalyst that prompted the circumcision teaching.
- 2. What does the Old Testament teach about circumcision that prompted this teaching (15:1)?** See Genesis 17:9-14. Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham. Anyone refusing circumcision was to be cut off from among the people (either executed or deported), and was clearly not part of the Abrahamic covenant.

ESV **Genesis 17:14** Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

- 3. Based on 15:2, how did Paul and Barnabas feel about this teaching on circumcision?** The words Luke used were “dissent” and “debate”. Paul likely wrote Galatians after he got back to Antioch from the first missionary journey, but before the Jerusalem Council. The problems dealt with in Galatians shows that he was well familiar with and opposed to the teaching that circumcision was needed for salvation or that the Gentiles should be required to obey the Law of Moses.

¹ That the apostles included the Jerusalem elders in the decision-making process shows the inclusive nature of their leadership.

ESV **Galatians 5:2** . . . if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

ESV **Galatians 5:6** . . . in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

What did Paul and Barnabas do both on their way to Jerusalem, and when they got there (15:3-4)? They told about God opening a door of faith to the Gentiles, bringing joy to all who heard. Their reaction to the report of Paul and Barnabas suggests they had the same view of circumcision that Paul and Barnabas had. The men who taught circumcision were a group within the Judean church; their views were not felt by everybody.

4. What sympathizers did the circumcision men (15:1) have in Jerusalem (15:5)? Jewish believers in the Jerusalem church who were members of the party of the Pharisees chimed in that the Gentile converts should not only be circumcised but also ordered to keep the Law of Moses. They heard the testimony of Paul and Barnabas and put in their 2 cents worth before the Council even got underway.

Circumcision & the Law: Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. The Law of Moses was associated with the Mosaic Covenant (or Old Covenant or Sinai Covenant). However, the two were linked. Accepting one effectively meant accepting the other.

ESV **Galatians 5:3** . . . every man who accepts circumcision . . . is obligated to keep the whole law.

******What was Peter's opinion on this matter (15:6-11)?** Peter said salvation came through the grace of the Lord Jesus, not through circumcision or the Law of Moses.²

5. What did Peter remind the council of in 15:7-8? *Reread aloud.* Peter reminded them that they all agreed he had been right in taking the gospel to the Gentiles (this happened with Cornelius). Peter also pointed out that God's approval of the Gentile believers was evident in the fact that God poured the Holy Spirit out on them even, as He had on the Jews at Pentecost. God's acceptance of them was, of course, in a circumcised state.

6. In 15:9, why did Peter point out that God made no distinction between the Jews and the Gentile believers? It was God Himself who removed the distinction between Jew and Gentile, pouring out the Spirit on both. Things like circumcision and the Law of Moses created a distinction between Jew and Gentile.

² **Church Polity:** "Debate", and "much" of it, was part of the process of decision making. We learn from 15:7 that only after much debate did Peter speak. Later, Luke records that Paul and Barnabas also spoke, as did James (brother of Jesus).

ESV **Ephesians 2:14-16** . . . he [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made us both [Jew & Gentile] one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

According to Peter, how were the hearts of the Gentiles cleansed (15:9)? It was by faith (no mention of circumcision).

How did Peter describe the Law of Moses in 15:10? He said it was an unbearable yoke.

What is a yoke (15:10)? A literal yoke is a wooden crosspiece that is fastened over the necks of two animals and attached to the plow or cart that they are to pull. A yoke was constricting and it was heavy. Metaphorically, the word yoke was used to refer to a burden or to bondage (such as slavery).

ESV **Matthew 11:28-30** Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

7. What made the Law an unbearable yoke (15:10)? See *Romans 7:7-25, 8:1-4*. The Law points to God's righteousness, but cannot impart righteousness. No one has the ability to be right with God by keeping the Law.

God's spiritual purpose in giving the Law of Moses was to show elect Jews their sinfulness and need for a righteousness apart from the Law.

"Run and do, the Law commands, but gives me neither feet, nor hands. Better news the Gospel brings. It bids me fly, and gives me wings!"

ESV **Romans 8:3-4** God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us . . .

8. What statement was Peter making through his question in 15:10? Through his question, Peter was making the statement that requiring the Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses was putting God to the test.

How would you define the word "test"? In school, what is a test? In a school setting, a test is something that measures a person's skill, knowledge, intelligence, or aptitude.

Often a horse will "test" a new rider. What does it mean to be tested by a horse? A horse will test a rider to see who is really in control, which of you is the alpha male. It is a leadership issue. A horse is a pack animal and he wants to know **1)** if you are in the herd and **2)** if you or he is the rightful leader.

Not: The Bible clearly states we are not test God:

ESV **Deuteronomy 6:16** You shall not put the LORD your God to the test . . .

What does it mean to test God? To test God is to demand something from a position of doubt in order to get God to prove Himself.

9. How would ordering the Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses constitute a test (15:10)?

See 15:7-9. The outpouring of the Spirit on the Gentiles showed that God had clearly already accepted the Gentiles just as they were (uncircumcised and without the Law of Moses). For the party of the Pharisees to now insist that the Gentiles had be circumcised and had to keep the Law of Moses would contradict what God had already declared. It would be, in effect, testing God.

10. According to Peter in 15:11, how are both Jew and Gentile saved? Both are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.

ESV **Ephesians 2:8** For by grace you have been saved through faith.

False Gospel: If you teach that a person has to do anything beyond having faith in order to be saved, you are teaching a false Gospel. Faith plus circumcision is a false gospel. Faith plus keeping the Law of Moses is a false gospel. Faith plus water baptism is a false gospel. Faith plus vigorous exertion in his service is a false gospel. Groups that teach false gospels include: Church of Christ, Roman Catholicism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Mormons (Latter-Day Saints).

ESV **Romans 3:21-25** . . . the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

******What was the judgment of James in this matter (15:12-21)?** Like Peter, James agreed that the Gentiles should not be troubled with circumcision and obeying the Law of Moses (15:19).³

11. In 15:12, why would Paul and Barnabas have told the council about the signs and wonders God has done among the Gentiles? The signs and wonders was God's authentication of what had happened to the Gentiles. The inclusion of Gentiles as God's new covenant people was definitely God's will.

12. Why is it noteworthy that the assembly fell silent when Paul and Barnabas spoke (15:12)? Evidently there was nothing that could be said against their testimony.

³ James seems to have changed his mind since the problem Paul dealt with in Galatians 2.

13. In 15:16-17, James quoted from Amos 9. What was his purpose in doing that? James used Amos as an example of how the Hebrew prophets (plural) predicted what God had done through Paul and Barnabas in calling Gentiles to be His people. The fallen tent of David was rebuilt in Jesus and extended to include Gentiles.⁴

New Covenant Theology: According to James, the church is the restored tent of David. This is not replacement theology, it is fulfillment theology.

How did James describe circumcision and obeying the Law of Moses in 15:19? He described it as “trouble”. Peter said the Law was **1)** a yoke that **2)** the people were unable to bear and now James said it was **3)** trouble.

What odd combination of things did James want the Gentiles to abstain from (15:20)? Three of these things concerned food: **1)** things polluted by idols (meat sacrificed to idols), **2)** sexual immorality, **3)** eating strangled animals and **4)** eating blood.

Law of Christ: This short list compiled by James (15:20) is relevant only to the discussion at hand: the few things from Moses that first-century Gentiles should obey. The much larger picture is that all Christians are under the Law of Christ. To be His disciple means to obey all that Jesus commanded (much more than the things mentioned by James)

14. Based on 15:21, what was his reasoning for the items on the list given in 15:20? See *Romans 14:20, 1 Corinthians 9:20 & 10:23-33*. It is clear that the Gentiles are not under the Law of Moses. Jesus Himself declared all foods to be clean (Mk 7:19). However, James suggested that the Gentiles of his generation follow a few basic Jewish dietary restrictions so as not to offend the Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

ESV Romans 14:20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.

ESV 1 Corinthians 9:20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.

Timeless Truth: “Sexual Immorality” (15:20) is to be avoided whether one is concerned about offending the Jews or not (15:21). James may have mentioned abstaining from sexual immorality because the Gentiles did not hold high standards of sexual purity. Though we are not under the Law of Moses, we are under the Law of Christ, which clearly forbids sexual immorality.

ESV Hebrews 13:4 . . . let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

⁴ James’ quote from Amos follows the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Masoretic text (Marshall, 267). The Masoretic may have been altered by apostate Judaism after Jesus came to lessen prophetic references to Him.

ESV **Romans 13:13** Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality . . .

ESV **1 Corinthians 6:13** The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord . . .

ESV **1 Corinthians 6:18** Flee from sexual immorality.

ESV **1 Corinthians 10:8** We must not indulge in sexual immorality . . .

ESV **1 Thessalonians 4:3** . . . this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality . . .

******What letter was sent to the church in Antioch (15:22-29)?** The apostles and elders agreed with what Peter and James had said, adding that the men who went to Antioch teaching circumcision were not authorized to do so.⁵

18. Why did were people chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas with the letter (15:22)?
See 15:27. It was probably for the sake of authentication, which suggests they expected opposition from the false teachers in Antioch.

19. Based on 15:24, what could be concluded about the teaching that believers should obey the Law of Moses? Such a teaching is 1) troubling, 2) unsettling, and 3) not based on the instruction of the apostles.

20. How should what the council decided be applied to Gentile Christians today (15:22-29)? *See Galatians 3:21-25.* **1)** Believers are not under the Law of Moses in any way shape, shape, form, or fashion. **2)** However, we should always be careful not to needlessly offend the unbelievers around us, which may mean not flaunting our Christian liberty in front of unbelievers or weak believers.

ESV **Galatians 3:23-25** . . . before faith came, we [Paul and his fellow Jewish believers] were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian,

21. According to Romans 3:19-20, 7:7, what spiritual function did the Law of Moses serve for the Jews?

ESV **Romans 3:19-20** . . . whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law [Jews] . . . through the law comes knowledge of sin.

⁵ The very nature of the Gospel had been called into question. If ever there were a proper time and place for the Apostles to make a decision alone, apart from the church, it was at the Jerusalem Council. Yet even here, the Apostles not only included the local Jerusalem elders, but also the whole church (15:22)!

ESV **Romans 7:7** . . . if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

How did they describe the council's decision in 15:25? It states that they had come to "one accord".⁶ The false teachers were clearly in the minority.

In 15:28, how did the letter describe the few accommodations they asked Gentiles to make for the Law? They still saw the four things to abstain from as a "burden" (15:28).

******22. How did the Antioch church respond to the Jerusalem letter (15:30-35)?** They found it encouraging, 15:31! Free from the Law, o happy condition! Their reaction to the letter shows they held the same view of circumcision that Paul and Barnabas had.

What did Judas, Silas, Paul, and Barnabas do after they delivered the letter (15:30-35)? Judas and Silas encouraged and strengthened the church with many prophetic words,⁷ and Paul and Barnabas taught and preached the word.⁸ This is in contrast to false teachers from Judea, whose teaching was squelched.

So What?

23. What did the Jerusalem Council decide about a Gentile believer's relationship to the Law of Moses? Gentile believers are not under the Law of Moses. This is a lesson many people are slow to learn. Beware of those who teach that believers should observe a Sabbath day, or have special dietary restrictions, or tithe. Also to be rejected are teachings that the blessings of the Mosaic Covenant are still valid today (prosperity preachers).

Secondary Application: The existence of the men from Judea (15:1), and of believers who belonged to the part of the circumcision, illustrates that there will always be people in the church who don't quite "get it".

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

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⁶ In general, major church decisions should be based on overall consensus, not majority rule.

⁷ Prophecy is not merely telling the future. The gift can also manifest itself in encouragement and strengthening through many words. See 1 Corinthians 14:3, 31.

⁸ "Teaching" is from *didasko* ("didactic") but "preaching" is from *euaggelizo* ("evangelize").